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ABSTRACT

A lesson plan, divided into five learning activities, explores certain fundamental beliefs and practices associated with Shintoism, the ancient religion of the Japanese. It is designed for integration into a course on world cultures or global studies. The unit is organized to allow high school students an opportunity to observe the variety of ways in which Shintoism is expressed in Japanese culture. The materials employed in the unit include Japanese myths and poems as well as accounts of Japanese festivals. Students are required to identify the elements of Shintoism as they are evident in the various manifestations. Each of the five learning activities focuses upon different issues or data, including religious expression, the nature of Shinto, Shintoism in Japanese mythology, Shintoism in Japanese poetry, and Shintoism in Japanese festivals. The unit requires students to participate in class discussions, to take notes on a lecture, to read Japanese texts in translation, and write their observations and judgments. The document concludes with a brief list of additional resources dealing with Shintoism. (RSL)

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SHINTO: THE TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF JAPAN

by Carol S. Lehman & Lois M. Miley

Distributed by
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SHINTO: THE TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF JAPAN

This lesson deals with certain fundamental beliefs and practices associated with Shintoism, the ancient faith of the Japanese. It is designed for integration into a course on world curtures or global studies at the point where Japan is the focus of attention. These lesson plans have been adapted from materials originally prepared by Carol Sue Lehman of West Middle School, Martinsville, Indiana, and Lois Marie Miley of Rogers High School, Michigan City, Indiana. Both took part in a summer institute in 1980 sponsored by the Indiana Religion Studies Project.

This unit is designed to allow high school students an opportunity to observe the variety of ways in which Shinto is expressed in Japanese culture. Accordingly, the materials employed in the unit include Japanese myths and poems as well as accounts of Japanese festivals. Students are required to identify the elements of Shinto as they are evident in the various manifestations.

This lesson is divided into five learning activities, each of which focuses upon different issues or different data. The unit requires students to participate in class discussions, to take notes on a lecture by the teacher, tc read Japanese texts in translation, and to write their observations and judgments. As a result of these activities the student should be able to demonstrate a knowledge of the fundamental ideas associated with Shintoism in Japanese culture.

This lesson was developed by the staff of the Indiana Religion Studies Project and represents one of many possible approaches to the academic study of religion in a secondary school setting. These materials may be duplicated for classroom use only.

A Project of the East Asian Studies Center and the Social Studies Development Center

LEARNING ACTIVITY 1

Focus: Religious expression

Objectives: Students will demonstrate an understanding of the concept of "religious expression" and an awareness of the diversity of forms through which any religion in any culture can be expressed.

Procedures:

Through teacher-directed discussion students will be introduced to the idea that every religion seeks expression in a variety of different cultural forms. Ask the students as a class to compile a list of "religious things"--items that they regard as "religious." Write the list on the board as it is developed by student contributions. This list should include such obvious items as houses of worship, saints or holy persons, holidays, festivals, sacred music, religious literature, charms or relics, etc.

By the compilation of this list students will discover the necessity of looking at a wide variety of items in any culture in order to identify those that are perceived as religious.

An alternative activity to this teacher-directed discussion is the use of the filmstrip-cassette program entitled "Religious Expression" which is part of the series on Religion in Human Culture prepared by Argus Communications, 7440 Natchez Avenue, Niles, Illinois, 60648.

LEARNING ACTIVITY 2

Focus: The nature of Shinto

Objectives: Students will demonstrate knowledge of the basics of Shintoism by means of notes taken on a lecture given by the teacher.

Procedures:

The teacher will deliver the following lecture or its equivalent, taking care to outline the major points of the presentation on the board.

There are many religions practiced in Japan today: Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Shinto. Most of these were brought into Japan from neighboring cultures. Only one of these major religions originated in Japan itself, namely, Shinto.

Shinto began as an attempt by the ancient Japanese to explain their existence and to make sense of their world. Unlike the modern notion of an ordered, regulated universe of predictable events, the ancients regarded their surroundings as full of mysteries. They were puzzled by such things as fire, storms, disease, the sun, the moon, droughts, floods, darkness, and light. The Japanese explained these phenomena by their belief that the world was inhabited by spiritual beings of all kinds, some good and some evil. The name "kami" meaning "above" was given to these spirits. The kami included gods and goddesses such as the sun goddess, the fire god, the moon goddess, and god of force. Kami also referred to the spirits of ancestors and to the nameless spirits of good and evil. In addition, kami included inanimate objects seen as awe-inspiring or possessing superior powers, such as a particular mountain, an old tree, or an unusual rock.

The religious life of the ancient Japanese was preoccupied with rendering these various spirits, the kami, helpful or at least harmless. Shrines were built as homes for the gods and spirits, festivals were held and ceremonies performed to show honor and gratitude or to seek forgiveness. Rituals developed which expressed these attitudes through dance and drama. Shinto, as it has evolved over the centuries, has become basically a religion of joy. Its

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emphasis is on the beauty of nature and on the wonder of life, on peace and harmony with nature and among men, and on loyalty and public service.

Shinto was and still is a loosely organized religion that embraces a wide variety of beliefs and practices. It has neither a founder nor explicit dogma. The name itself, a Chinese term which means "way of the spirits", was not coined until the sixth century C.E. when the Japanese wished to distinguish native Japanese religion from the newer religions imported from China and elsewhere. While the Japanese were willing to accept and borrow much from the advanced culture of the Chinese, they also looked about for their own indigenous cultural heritage. Shinto, being distinctively Japanese, was perceived as a symbol for Japanese identity. The ancient religion was then given a name and an attempt was made to put into written form some of the beliefs and practices which constituted Shinto.

During the centuries following the arrival of other religions in Japan, most Japanese observed the rites of and believed in several religions at the same time. This is still true today. But Shinto has retained a special place among the religions of Japan. Shinto explains the origins of Japan, proclaims the divinity of its rulers, and provides the Japanese with an identity separate from the Chinese.

Despite the lack of conventional religious institutions or structures and the abundance of diverse practices, the following religious elements are basic to Shinto.

1. Shinto provides the Japanese with a strong sense of national identity and patriotism.

2. Shinto emphasizes a worshipful attitude toward nature and towards the beauties of nature.

3. Shinto includes belief in spirits, demons, and supernatural forces.

4. The believers in Shinto practice ancestor worship and erect home shrines to honor their ancestors.

5. Shinto embraces a multitude of gods or spirits and therefore is polytheistic.

These diverse elements of Shinto can be seen in many different aspects of Japanese culture and society.

After completion of the lecture, the teacher should collect the students' notes and evaluate them on the adequacy of their coverage of the lecture outline and relevant details.

LEARNING ACTIVITY 3

Focus: Shintoism in Japanese mythology

Objectives: The students will demonstrate their knowledge of the elements of Shinto by identifying the religious beliefs expressed in the myths.

Procedures: The teacher should inform the students that there is no creation story in Japanese mythology. The gods and goddesses simply appear and begin to create that which became Japan. The major source of Japanese mythology is the Kojiki, the "Chronicles of Ancient Events" collected in the 7th and 8th centuries C.E. in response to the entrace of Chinese culture and religions into Japan. The following excerpts from the myths are taken from Basil Hall Chamberlain's translation of the Kojiki published in 1882.

Have the students read the texts of the following Japanese myths and prepare a list of the Shinto beliefs and practices that are apparent.

I.

"At the beginning of heaven and earth, there came into existence in the Plain of High Heaven the Heavenly Center Lord Kami, next, the Kami of High Generative Force, and then the Kami of Divine Generative Force.

Next, when the earth was young, not yet solid, there developed something like reed-shoots from which the Male Kami of Excellent Reed Shoots and then Heavenly Eternal Standing Kami emerged.

Then, there came into existence Earth Eternal Standing Kami, Kami of Abundant Clouds Field, male and female Kami of Clay, male and female Kami of Post, male and female Kami of Great Door, Kami of Complete Surface and his spouse, Kami of Awesomeness, Izanagi (kami-who-invites) and his spouse, Izanami (kami-who-is-invited."

The heavenly kami at this time gave the heavenly jeweled spear to Izanagi and Izanami and instructed them to complete and solidify the land. Thus, the two kami, standing on the floating

bridge in Heaven, lowered the spear and stirred around, and as they lifted up the spear, the brine dripping from the tip of the spear piled up and formed an island. This was the island of Onogoro.

After giving birth to the land, they proceeded to bear kami (such as the kami of the wind, of the tree, of the mountain, and of the plains). But Izanami died after giving birth to the kami of fire.

Because he so loved his wife, Izanagi journeyed to the underworld to find her. When Izanagi reached the underworld and found his wife Izanami, he wished to look at her and to convince her to return with him to the land of the living. But when he lit a torch and looked at her, he saw that her body was ruined and decayed. He turned and fled back to the land of the living.

Izanagi wished to purify himself after having been to such an unclean and horrible land. "Thus arriving at (a river), he purified and exorcised himself. When he washed his left eye, there came into existence the Sun Goddess, or Heavenly Illuminating Great Kami (Amaterasu), and when he washed his right eye, there emerged the Moon Kami (Tsukiyomi). Finally, as he washed his nose there came into existence Valiant Male Kami (Susanoo)."

II.

The following two myths focus on Amaterasu (the Sun Goddess) and her sibling kamis. In the first of the two, her brother Susanoo, the Storm God, played a trick upon Amaterasu, and she went away to a cave to pout. The other kami did not want to live in a world without the Sun Goddess; so they worked out a plan to bring her out of the cave. They hung beautiful beads and a mirror before the entrance of her cave and then made a great commotion.

The Sun Goddess, intrigued by all this, opened the rock-cave door slightly, wondering why it was that the 800 myriads of kami were

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laughing. Then Kami of Heavenly Headgear said, "There is a kami nobler than you, and that is why we are happy and dancing." While she was speaking thus, Kami of the Little Roof and Kami of Grand Bead showed the mirror to the Sun Goddess. Thereupon, the Sun Goddess, thinking this ever more strange, gradually came out of the cave, and the hidden Kami of Grand Bead took her hand and pulled her out. Then as the Sun Goddess reappeared, the Plain of High Heaven was naturally illuminated.

III.

The Sun Goddess was able to get her revenge on Susanoo, however. The following myth tells how.

Susanoo sought a permanent (home) upon the earth. It is said that he "sought in the land of Izumo for a place where he might build a palace. Then he arrived at a place (called) Suga, and said: 'On coming to this place, my august heart is pure,' and in that place he built a palace to dwell in. So that place is now called Suga." His descendants continued to live in Izumo until the descendant of the sixth generation was vested with the sovereignty of Japan.

This position he was not allowed to hold, however, for the Sun Goddess, who had never forgiven her brother for his pranks and (misbehavior) felt that none of his children should rule the Central Land-of-Reed Plains, in spite of the fact that they had so long been wandering in them. She therefore decided to send a grandson of her own who should rule the earth. For this task she chose (a) prince..., giving him as parting gifts the eight feet of curved jewels and the mirror which had lured her from the cave, and, also, the Herb-Quelling-Great-Sword which her brother had presented to the gods of heaven...

After receiving (these, the) prince...left the heavenly rock seat, ...and descended to the peak of (a) mountain...on the island of Kyushu. Then began the struggles between the grandson of the Sun Goddess and the descendants of Susanoo. The conflict ended when the god...retaining spiritual power only, gave up his temporal power to the Sun Goddess' grandson. From the latter descended a prince who is known as the first emperor of Japan--Jimmu whose reign the Japanese have fixed as beginning in 660 B.C.E. Thus was created a divine sovereign who is still worshipped as the first in a series unbroken for ages eternal."

After the students have completed the readings and the preparation of their lists, discuss with the class their findings. The discussion should reveal the Shinto belief in polytheism, in the idea of the divinity of the emperor (a view no longer officially held in Japan), in the divine origins of Japan, and in the relationship between the emperor of Japan and the Sun Goddess.

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LEARNING ACTIVITY 4

Focus: Shintoism in Japanese poetry

Objectives: Students will demonstrate their knowledge of Shinto by identifying the elements of religious beliefs expressed in selected Japanese poetry.

Procedures: The teacher should inform the students that it has often been said that the finest sentiments and moods of the Japanese have been voiced in their poetry. The haiku is a 17 syllable poem. It does not tolerate wordiness nor detailed expressions of feelings. Yet the descriptions of nature are picturesque, brief though they may be. The haiku reflect the Shinto emphasis on simplicity and control of the emotions.

Have the students divide into groups and read together the following poems.

Mist

Above the veil
of mist, from time to time
there lifts a sail...
GAKOKU

Winter

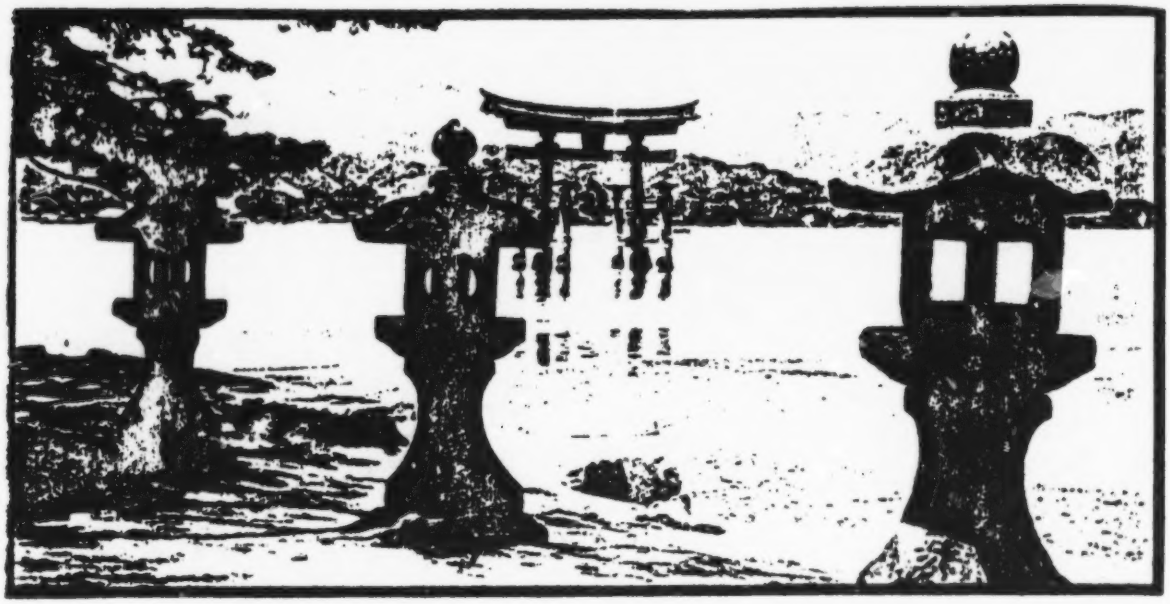
Mountains and plains,
all are taken by snow--
nothing remains!
JOSO

Falling Cherry Blossoms

The scattering bloom
turns into torn waste paper,
and a bamboo broom...
BUSON

Night Garden

An ancient pond;
splash of the water
when a frog jumps in.
BASHO



The Prisoner

At the butterflies
the caged bird gazes, longing--
watch its eyes!
ISSA

Spring Night

Plum-blossoms swaying!
'Here! Here! Steal this one!'--is that
what the moon's saying?
ISSA

Loneliness

No sky at all;
no earth at all;--and still
the snowflakes fall...
HANSHIN

The Crow

On a leafless branch
a crow has settled:
autumn nightfall.
BASHO

Each group should decide upon the "meaning" of the poem and the manner in which it reflects the perspective of Shintoism. One person from each group should then report to the class the findings of that group. The reports should feature the Shinto ideas of the beauty and simplicity of nature.

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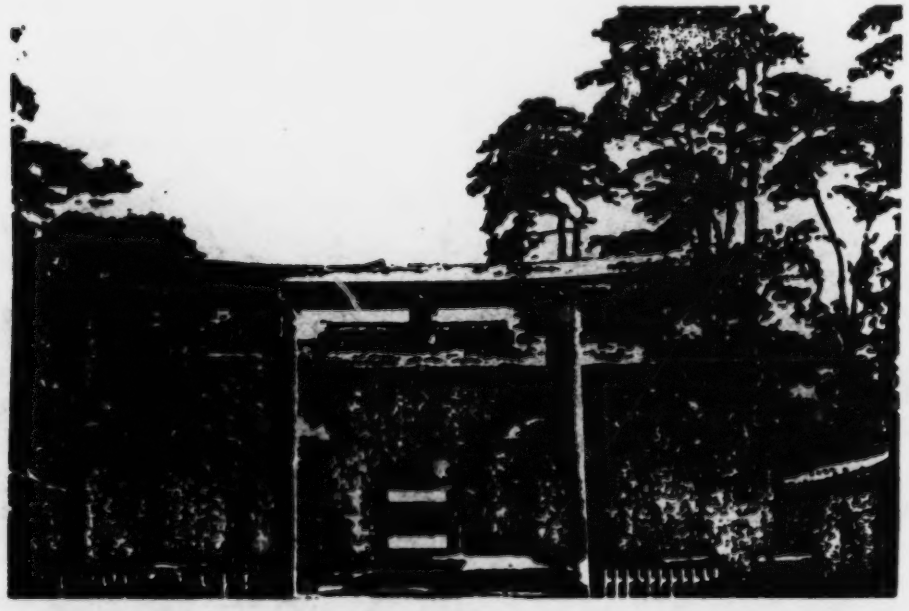
LEARNING ACTIVITY 5

Focus: Shintoism in Japanese festivals

Objectives: Students will demonstrate their knowledge of Shinto by identifying the religious expressions within selected Japanese festivals.

Procedures: The teacher should inform the students that the Japanese calendar opens with a festival and closes with a festival. These festivals began in ancient times when people desired the supernatural help of the gods. The ancients began to pray for protection, for better harvests, for cures from sickness, and for a better life. Holding a festival to please a guardian deity became the most characteristic religious part of the life of the Japanese. Shrines were built and became the centers of community life, providing a certain order and stability. These festivals have continued even into modern times, illustrating one way in which the elements of ancient religion have survived to the present.



Have the students read the account of the following festivals and identify in writing the elements of Shinto that are evident in these occasions.

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I. In the month of March farmers and villagers of the town of Kashima gather together to welcome the spring plum blossoms. They select a young boy to represent a god-like person within whom the guardian spirit will reside. This young boy is then carried around the town of Kashima at the head of a procession of the townspeople to honor the guardian spirit.

II. During the month of October in many parts of Japan festivals are held that honor various animals such as the lion. Any animal figure may be selected including such things as dragons or animals with the head of a lion and the body of a dog. The selection of the animals rests on the belief that the animals are guardian spirits that can frighten away demons. A dance called shishi-mai is performed during the festivals to conquer the evil spirits.

III. During the winter months of the year the people of the northern island of Hokkaido hold a festival to honor the bear. The bear was once believed to be the powerful god of the mountains. In preparation for the festival, a bear cub is captured and raised until full-grown. Then at the time of the festival a shrine is built in honor of the bear god and wine is offered to him. The bear is also fed fish.

IV. One festival that children especially enjoy involves young men who are dressed in frightful costuems. They run through the village shouting fearfully as they go and knocking upon the doors of the houses. The children in each house are asked if they have been good or if they have been lazy. After being served sake and fish and after being assured that the children in the house are not lazy, the costumed devils leave the house to search elsewhere for lazy children.

V. In the New Year festivals held throughout Japan the farmers and the fishermen show their gratitude to the guardian spirits for a good year. The farmers decorate their plows and implements and place a special offering on the altar of the local shrine. The fishermen decorate their boats and nets and offer similar gifts at the shrines.

After completion of the assignment, discuss the interpretations of the students. Then collect the written statements and evaluate them.

Additional Resources Dealing with Shinto:

John B. Noss, Man's Religions (New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 6th edition, 1980).

Lewis M. Hopfe, Religions of the World (Encino, California, Glencoe Publishing Co., Inc. 2nd edition, 1979).

Joseph M. Kitagawa, Religions of the East (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, enlarged edition, 1976).